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ABSTRACT

This document is the report of one phase of a Minnesota study to examine the problem of misrepresentation and overrepresentation of African American, American Indian, and Latino students in special education. Phase 2 of the study involved seven focus groups comprised of minority parents throughout rural and urban areas of Minnesota. Focus groups addressed questions concerning what works, what doesn't work, what the contributing factors are, and what needs to be done. All focus groups felt that individualized instruction and support services provided in a small classroom setting were two of the most effective aspects of special education. Most participants also expressed strong support for the Individual Education Program process, the value of staff training in cultural awareness, and activities to promote parent involvement. Specific group emphases included: discrimination and racism (African American); the lack of communication between home and school (American Indian); and the lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity (Latino). Comparison with outcomes of the professional focus groups of Phase 1 found that both professionals and parents supported tutorial and small group instruction and staff training in cultural awareness as effective. However, where professionals emphasized the use of a team approach to decision-making, parent groups indicated they rarely saw themselves as contributing members of their child's educational planning team. Contains 37 references. (DB)

ED 429 409

Minority and Cultural Issues Work Group
Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning
Division of Special Education

Final Report

Phase II: Minority Parents

Disproportionate Representation of Minorities in Special Education: A Focus Group Study of Parent Perspectives

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1997

Final Report

Phase II: Focus Group Analysis—Minority Parents

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Minority and Cultural Issues Work Group

Vision, Mission, and Initiatives Summary

Vision

An appropriate public education for each student.

Mission

We promote appropriate representation of students of color in special education through:

a) *clarification of issues*
b) *collaboration with education agencies, organizations, programs, and families*
c) *identifying best practices in non-biased assessment*
d) *dissemination of information*
e) *staff development activities*

Initiatives

Initiatives Completed or In-Progress

- Conducted focus groups with professional groups and parents of students of color with disabilities to study the issue of disproportionate representation.
- Preparation of assessment guidelines for monitors and used in the training for peer monitors.
- Creation of a project task force to draft guidelines for the assessment of American Indian and African American students.
- Development of assessment guidelines and training resources for non-LEP students of color.
- Implemented a process to gather referral data in four pilot school districts that will be incorporated into the statewide data collection system to monitor special education referral trends and patterns.
- Developed guidelines for intellectual assessment in cooperation with the Minnesota School Psychologists Association (MSPA). Field review of the guidelines will occur the fall of 1997.

Ongoing Initiatives

- Preparation and dissemination of translated special education due process materials (e.g., Somali, Hmong, Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, Spanish and Russian).
- Audiotape parent rights information in Hmong, Spanish, and English for parents who have reading difficulties, or who prefer to access information orally.
- Provide ongoing support to programs designed to increase outreach and promote involvement of parents of color.
- Engage in collaborative training activities with the Office of Indian Education and the Office of LEP Education to provide training to Indian and Bilingual home-school liaisons.

Initiatives for 1997-98

- Completion of assessment guidelines for minority students.
- Conduct a focus group study involving the issues of under-representation with professionals and parents in the Asian American community.
- Initiate a data collection process to examine potential funding options for African American home-school liaisons.
- Conduct preliminary research and prepare an action plan to assess the language needs of American Indian students and how the special education system should address those needs.
- Establish an on-line data base of bilingual interpreters in cooperation with the Office of LEP Education.
- Identify appropriate prereferral interventions to address the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic needs of African American and American Indian students.
- Conduct an analysis of referral data elements which have been added to the statewide data collection system to study referral trends of minority students.

Final Report

Focus Group Analysis: Minority Parents

Minority and Cultural Issues Work Group
Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning
Division of Special Education

Introduction

This report represents the second phase of an effort to study the issue of placement of minority students in special education programs. Like many other states in the nation, Minnesota is being increasing challenged with the problem of disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs. Based on data maintained by the Minnesota Civil Rights Information System (MNCRIS), disproportionate representation of African American, Latino, and American Indian students appears to be a growing concern in the state, particularly in the less "visible" disability areas such as learning disabilities, emotional and behavior disorders, and mild mental impairment. While the reasons for such placements have been attributed to a wide range of causal factors, including assessment and identification practices and cultural barriers (Luft, 1995), this phenomenon has been witnessed on a nationwide scale, with a trend that is clearly moving in the direction of increasingly utilizing the special education system as a primary vehicle for the delivery of remedial and compensatory education for minority students. Although some states have undertaken efforts to reduce or minimize inappropriate placements, Lara (1994) states that "few have developed mechanisms for addressing the overrepresentation issue once a district is suspected of having some disproportionality."

Recognizing that Minnesota had experienced a significant growth in the numbers of minority students declared eligible for special education services, the Minority and Cultural Issues Work Group of the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning (CFL) designed a study which involved a series of focus groups to examine issues relating to the disproportionate placement of minority students. To guide its activities, the Work Group developed a vision which called for "an appropriate public education for each student" and a mission which promoted appropriate representation of students of color in special education by concentrating efforts in the following areas:

- a clarification of the issues
- collaboration with education agencies, organizations, programs, and families
- identifying best practices in non-biased assessment

- dissemination of information
- staff development activities

Planned in a series of "phases," Phase I activities involved an analysis of eight focus groups of professional staff serving African American, American Indian, and Latino populations in the educational setting across the state. The purpose of this phase, which was completed in 1996, was to obtain information regarding factors contributing to minority misrepresentation, materials and resources available to address this problem, and to identify promising solutions. Membership for Phase I focus groups were comprised of professional personnel representing a variety of educational and community service organizations in such roles as special education teachers, administrators, and related services personnel. In the formation of these groups, a concerted effort was made to ensure that each group met the following criteria: minority culture representation, dominant culture representation, gender balance, geographic location (e.g., urban, rural, reservation), professional role diversity, and participants licensed and assigned to work in a disability area. Key themes identified by Phase I groups of professional staff can be seen in Table 1. A more comprehensive description of Phase I findings can be reviewed in the document entitled *Final Report—Phase I: Focus Group Analysis, Professional Groups* (Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning, 1996).

In 1997, the Phase II activities were to examine the issue of disproportionate representation from the perspective of parents and family members, both as members of an ethnic or racial group, and as parents or primary caregivers of minority students currently being served in special education programs. As a follow-up to the focus groups conducted with professional staff in Phase I, it is intended that Phase II will help to clarify and illuminate on previous findings, bringing to light other issues and concerns and therefore contributing toward a more comprehensive understanding of the problem.

Literature Review

In reporting results of a policy forum held with educators, researchers, members of advocacy groups, and representatives of the federal government on the issue of disproportionate representation of minority youth in special education programs, Project FORUM (Markowitz, 1996) outlined a number of recommended strategies to address this problem, along with specific strategies which could be implemented at various levels within the educational system. In addition to professional recommendations for staff, increasing community involvement, and promoting a greater level of collaboration between regular and special educators, forum participants also endorsed stronger efforts to promote parent and family involvement. Recommending that "parent and family involvement should be solicited and incorporated early in the child's school experience and maintained throughout the middle and high school years," there was a consensus that parent and family involvement should not simply begin at the point where problems are emerging at the "prereferral intervention" level. Strategies for increasing the involvement of minority parents and families included improving current modes of communication, designing in-

Table 1: Key Issues of Professional Focus Groups (Phase I)

	What Works?	What Doesn't Work?	What are Contributing Factors?	What Needs to be Done?
African American	■ Team approach to decision-making ■ Family involvement, parent participation ■ Student focused/small group instruction	■ Regular education role ■ Referral and placement ■ Setting standards and norms	■ Poverty ■ Attitudes and racism ■ Cultural awareness and values	■ Staff development and training ■ Improve preservice preparation ■ Regular education role ■ Early intervention ■ Role models and minority staff representation
	What Works?	**What Doesn't Work?**	**What are Contributing Factors?**	**What Needs to be Done?**
American Indian	■ Family involvement, parent participation ■ Home-school liaison/advocates ■ Due process, rights and protections	■ Assessment practices ■ Eligibility criteria & categorization	■ Poverty ■ Assessment practices ■ Attitudes and racism ■ Family stressors ■ Cultural awareness and values	■ Preservice preparation ■ Staff development and training ■ Improve assessment practices ■ Home-school liaisons
	What Works?	**What Doesn't Work?**	**What are Contributing Factors?**	**What Needs to be Done?**
Latino	■ Team approach to decision-making ■ Family involvement, parent participation ■ Home-school liaisons/advocates ■ Limited English Proficient (LEP) staff, bilingual evaluators	■ Regular education role ■ Dual language responsibilities of student ■ Eligibility criteria & categorization	■ Assessment practices ■ Referral and placement	■ Staff development and training ■ Instructional/ teaching practices ■ English as Second Language (ESL) and bilingual staff

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volvement activities that reflect group customs and traditions, and providing training to teams of educators and parents on critical general and special education issues.

To a large degree, these recommendations reflect much of what has been emphasized as a result of Goals 2000 and similar initiatives—the recognition that parents and families constitute a critical part of the child's success in the school setting and that their participation can often make the difference between success and failure. Harry (1992) has also suggested that parent and family involvement can be a pivotal factor in helping to address problems related to disproportionate representation in special education. But before this can occur, however, she indicated that educational systems must first demonstrate a willingness to change the "balance of power" from one that has historically relegated the role of parents and families as "consent givers" to that of true educational collaborators. Assessing the current status of parent involvement among low income African American populations in particular, she observed that two traditions have contributed to at least some of present problems experienced by minorities in the area of special education: (1) the deficit view of the African American family based on misperceptions that parents are not interested in participating in the process of planning their child's educational program, and (2) the deficit view of many types of disabilities which rest upon a pathological, medical-model tradition. As a result, she asserts that the combined effects of these two traditions have served to limit parent involvement and have strengthened the role of educators with regard to making placement decisions about children.

A deficit view of minority families was also noted in an earlier work by Reeves (1988) who observed that the term "at-risk" has essentially evolved into a "verbal dumping ground," where student populations so labeled are often from low income groups or a minority culture. Thus, when educators think of "hard-to-reach" parents, many think of such characteristics as one's ethnic background, low socioeconomic status, urban, inner-city residence, public housing occupancy and little formal education. Similarly, the deficit view of disabilities has come under question by both Hahn (1995) and Coulter (1996) who make the argument that some disabilities found within minority populations are socially determined, and hence, are often a manifestation of complex environmental factors which require a sociopolitical, rather than psychoeducational perspective in seeking solutions.

White-Clark and Decker (Undated Manuscript) have documented a number of misconceptions about the involvement of low income and minority parents, citing research by Chavkin and Williams (1993), White (1995), and Zeigler (1987) to show that these misconceptions occur both on the part of educators and parents, resulting in a number of barriers which have inhibited communication and involvement. Summarizing the major finding of Freedman, Ascheim, and Zerchykov (1989), five factors were identified which inhibited the involvement of some parents:

1) *School practices that do not accommodate the diversity of families served*—Parent involvement events and opportunities are scheduled at times that are inconvenient for working parents. Communications to parents are written in languages that are not appropriate for all families. Parents are not given information or materials they can use at home to support their children's learning. School staff consciously or unconsciously

convey the attitude that underinvolved families do not care about education and have little to contribute when they do participate.

2) *Time and childcare constraints*—Working parents often have difficulty attending school events that are held during the work day. Parents may have child care responsibilities that prevent them from participating in programs held at school.

3) *Negative experiences with schools*—Parents whose own school experiences were unsuccessful or stressful may be uncomfortable in interactions with their children's school. Young parents who are school dropouts may be reluctant to re-enter the school setting.

4) *Schools' lack of support for cultural diversity*—Parents with non-majority cultural and linguistic backgrounds may be uncomfortable in schools that do not explicitly value diversity. Linguistic-minority parents who receive only English communications from the school may feel that the school does not respect or value their heritage. Parents who have experienced discrimination may feel alienated from all public institutions.

5) *The primacy of basic needs*—Some families suffer extreme economic stress; addressing their own food, clothing, and shelter needs takes precedence over involvement in their children's schooling.

In studying factors related to disproportionate representation, Luft (1995) reiterated many of the same points described above, suggesting that at least part of this problem can be attributed to conceptual differences which exist related to such areas as disability categories and issues involving class and status. To help alleviate the discrepancies in the perceptions of some educators, she recommends they be provided with culturally competent information, accompanied with preferred practices for serving minority students. Although Bowman (1994) has stated that "no standard strategies exist to direct cross-cultural professional practice," she suggests that a number of steps can be taken toward educating culturally and lingually diverse groups of students. In addition to recommending increased efforts to emphasize prevention and early intervention, using alternative forms of assessment, changing how schools interact with other communicating agencies, she suggests that educators must make greater efforts to "listen to the voices of excluded minorities" and "prepare teachers to educate a greater range of children."

Harry (1994) also emphasized the role of the parent in the special education process and their importance in stemming the growth of disproportionate representation. However, she also has indicated that before substantive progress can be seen in helping families to more fully engage in the education of their children, more training and professional development initiatives will be necessary in the area of home-school collaboration, suggesting that family members from various ethnic and racial backgrounds can be utilized as resources. Harry also advocated that the balance of power relationships between parents and educators must change in order for parents and families to assume more of a collaborative role. As a result of this change, she envisions parents in the following roles:

1) *Parents as Assessors*—Providers of the child's social history in a family-focused assessment process.

2) *Parents as Presenters and Reporters*—This official role would increase the value that professionals place on parental input and be a signal that their input is valued and needed.

3) *Parents as Policymakers*—Parents would be recruited to serve on school-based advisory boards as a means of sharing power and helping to boost parental participation in the school.

4) *Parents as Advocates and Peer Supports*—Initiators of parent-to-parent advocacy activities.

While increasing the involvement of minority parents and families in the special education process represents an important part in addressing the issue of disproportionate representation, it is only one of several other recommendations offered by those who participated in a policy forum sponsored by Project FORUM (Markowitz, 1996). Over the course of several policy strategy sessions conducted, participants generated a series of recommendations, along with a number of strategies that could be implemented to address this issue. Key areas in which recommendations were made by Project FORUM participants included:

1) The importance of having school staff trained to work with culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students and recruitment of staff reflecting this level of diversity.

2) The need for ongoing professional development in such areas as positive classroom management, identifying learning strengths, effective instructional practices for diverse learners, and nonbiased assessment.

3) The need for general and special educators to work together.

4) The need for special education data to be disaggregated by race/ethnic group.

5) The importance of school districts monitoring referral and assessment processes and exploring ways to address disproportionality.

The findings of this policy forum reflects what is perhaps the most comprehensive examination of the issue of disproportionate placement of minority students in special education programs to date. As such, it addresses the issue from a multidimensional perspective and supports current efforts at the federal level to promote family and parent involvement as a priority under such initiatives as Goals 2000.

Procedure

To conduct Phase II activities, members of the Minority and Cultural Issues Work Group conducted seven focus groups representing African American, American Indian, and Latino parents throughout rural and urban portions of Minnesota. The demographic characteristics of each group can be seen in Table 2. The number of participants for each focus group was determined by establishing a guideline which stipulated each group shall have no less than 5, and no more than 10 members in order to achieve optimal results. The only exception to this general rule was the manner in which Latino groups were conducted. In some cases, it was necessary to obtain data by conducting individual interviews with parents, where an interpreter was present to take notes and record observations.

Table 2: Focus Group Characteristics (Phase II)		
Cultural Group	Number	Location
African American	1	Minneapolis
African American	1	Saint Paul
African American	1	Duluth
American Indian	1	Northern Minnesota (Duluth/Cloquet)
American Indian	1	Metropolitan Area
Latino	1	Metropolitan Area/St. Paul
Latino	1	Western Minnesota/Willmar

Using the general procedures established in Phase I, once participants were recruited and assembled in their respective groups, they were presented with an introductory statement by the facilitator, followed by a presentation of the MNCRIS statistical summaries compiled to report on the status of minority populations within the realm of the special education system. Upon reviewing this information, focus group participants were asked to reflect on four primary questions about the subject of minority overrepresentation within special education. In brief, focus groups were asked to respond to the following questions:

1) *What works?*
2) *What does not work?*
3) *What are contributing factors?*
4) *What needs to be done?*

Essentially, the first two questions dealt with issues directly related to the MNCRIS data shown to the group while the latter two questions were intended to address issues related to the findings of studies conducted at earlier points by CFL staff. These findings concluded: (1) a relationship exists between race and special education placement, and (2) race appears to be a factor which influences referral, identification, and placement practices in special education. Responses of focus group members were recorded by audio tape, supplemented by field notes prepared by group facilitators.

Once all of the focus groups were conducted, their responses were reviewed to identify common issues or concerns in which there appeared to be some degree of similarity in content. These issues were then grouped and assigned a general descriptor (e.g., assessment practices) to facilitate the process of identifying key issues or "themes." The primary objective of this activity was to synthesize and narrow the scope of the many types of statements made by focus group members. Similar to the process used in Phase I, once descriptors for key issues were developed, they were placed on a grid as a way of portraying the range of issues and

concerns for each question posed to the groups. This grid is depicted in Table 3 and is intended to provide a general overview of key issues identified by parent focus groups. It also serves as a starting point in helping to ascertain what, if any, unique themes can be observed in a separate analysis of the groups or if commonalties could be identified in a combined analysis of the groups. It should be noted that the term "unique" is used somewhat advisedly since thematic content is not considered mutually exclusive; that is, themes will overlap among the groups, and it is likely that no one theme will be associated with just one group. In addition, a Summary of Key Issues section can be found at the end of this report. This summary includes an overview of key areas, concerns, and issues based on the responses of cultural focus groups to each of the four primary questions.

Once all of the relevant key issues were identified, another iteration of the focus group analysis was conducted by an extensive tape-based analysis similar to the process described by Krueger (1994). First, all tapes were listened to and an abridged transcription of the focus group content was entered on a computer. The only exception to this process was in the case of data obtained from Latino focus groups, where data was analyzed by using a written transcript of a Spanish-speaking interpreter who was present at each session. Second, these data were analyzed question by question to determine how well the themes which emerged from this level of analysis correlated with the initial, or preliminary findings. Using information from the tape-based analysis, it was then possible to extract specific comments from focus group members which supported thematic areas between and within the groups. As such, it served as a database which could be used to provide readers with important contextual information about complex and multifaceted issues (e.g., "communication"). Finally, these data were also used as a means of synthesizing information in order to identify major areas of "need" and the framework for a plan of action.

Focus Group Summaries

African American

Individualized instruction and the application of specialized instructional strategies were major themes among African American focus groups regarding those aspects of special education services that were considered to be helpful or "what worked." In general, they appeared to be supportive of the due process system and seemed to especially value the development of goals and objectives included in Individual Educational Plans. In addition to instructional options for students with disabilities, African American groups also commented on how much they valued efforts on behalf of the schools to involve parents in the special education process and the importance of establishing and maintaining clear lines of communication. Based on their discussions, many of the participants, especially when they were talking about their children, offered many favorable comments about special education, indicating that such services have largely been beneficial and have helped their child. Comments regarding the beneficial aspects of special education and how it has helped their own child include:

Table 3: Key Issues of Parent Focus Groups (Phase II)

	What Works?	What Doesn't Work?	What are Contributing Factors?	What Needs to be Done?
African American	■ Individualized, one-to-one instruction ■ Individual Educational Plans (IEP); goals and objectives ■ Tutorial, small group instruction ■ Parent advocacy	■ Placement process & categorization ■ Assessment practices ■ Home-school communication ■ Current efforts to inform and involve parents	■ Racism and discrimination ■ Lack of cultural awareness and family dynamics ■ Lack of communication, trust	■ Cultural awareness and diversity training ■ Training for regular educators in referral practices ■ Increase parent involvement and communication
	What Works?	**What Doesn't Work?**	**What are Contributing Factors?**	**What Needs to be Done?**
American Indian	■ Individualized, one-to-one instruction ■ Advocacy, PACER ■ Tutorial, small group instruction ■ American Indian role models in education	■ Placement process & categorization ■ Home-school communication ■ Current efforts to inform and involve parents	■ Lack of early intervention ■ Lack of communication, trust ■ Lack of cultural awareness and family dynamics ■ Reduction in the number of American Indian Home/School Liaisons	■ Cultural awareness and diversity training ■ Increase the availability of after school activities ■ Increase availability of nonspecial education alternatives ■ Increase parent involvement and communication
	What Works?	**What Doesn't Work?**	**What are Contributing Factors?**	**What Needs to be Done?**
Latino	■ Individualized, one-to-one instruction ■ Tutorial, small group instruction ■ Bilingual/bicultural staff and evaluators	■ Pull out programs ■ Assessment practices ■ Placement process & categorization ■ Current efforts to inform and involve parents	■ Racism and discrimination ■ Lack of cultural awareness and family dynamics ■ Lack of communication, trust	■ Cultural awareness and diversity training ■ Increase parent involvement and communication ■ Increase bilingual and bicultural staff/evaluators

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"I believe the special education classes are good because they are small, individualized, and can meet his needs...he's a perfectionist so he can get the attention he needs—he's doing quite well."

"Special education has more one-to-one attention for the students who need it."

We got (my son) into special ed and (this year) he is doing pre-algebra because someone took the time to show him a different way to learn...(they) showed him a different technique."

"My son is 12 years old...his 4 year old brother is reading, but he's not...it's been a lot of work (and) special education is working pretty good, but he's got a long way to go."

"There's no way we can do it without (special education) help."

When focus group members were asked to address questions directly related to misrepresentation, they identified a number of concerns involving problems associated with the assessment and placement process, lack of capacity of the regular education system to provide minority youth with needed remedial and tutorial instruction and what they considered the poor quality of special education offered to minority youth with disabilities. In discussions directly related to the issue of misrepresentation, a consistent theme apparent in all African American focus groups were concerns expressed about discrimination and racism. Some participants asserted that racial characteristics alone often resulted in a qualitatively different level of treatment within the educational system, with several members recounting their own personal experiences of discrimination. In addition, comments about one's socioeconomic status often accompanied these observations, with the implication that one's race and income level frequently results in limited access to quality educational services. Summarizing the sentiment of many other focus group members, one parent said "What African American parents want and what Caucasian parents want for their child is basically the same...they want them to grow up healthy, productive...do them proud—that's the same type of goal." Other comments related to race and discrimination included:

"Race, money...I feel there is some racism in it (education system)...you can see it visually."

"Race."

"Race—depending on the amount of money you're making...depends on where your child is placed and the help you get."

"Race is a big factor with my son because he's the only black child (in the classroom)—income could be a factor...I'm not working."

"Income or race should not be a factor...if your child has (special education) needs, it should be addressed the same way every other child's needs are addressed."

"It (the district's discipline policy) only applies to certain students...(If you are) Black, it's brought down on you more harder."

"I have seen it from the time when I was in special education—it's really messed up...I know it because they did it with me...I would just be left there with a big packet of work to do."

In addition to citing issues involving racism and discrimination as factors which contribute to misrepresentation, focus group members also expressed a number of concerns about the assessment and placement process, suggesting that the process lacked sensitivity and was sometimes used as a substitute to address other types of problems. Participants questioned the validity of the assessment process, indicating that educators need to have a better understanding of the cultural context and the challenging economic conditions in which many minority families must live. Comments about assessment and placement included:

"There's something wrong with (special education) placement...I'll say that for the record."

"They tried to place my other son in special education—the teacher insisted...but the report had another child's name sprinkled in with mine—it was a mistake. We had a meeting and we had them destroy the report...my point is that they seemed over enthusiastic about doing this assessment and placing him."

"I don't think a lot of them are real special needs, but they place them instead of addressing the problem."

"A lot of times, they take kids where they might have a problem and they just want to throw them over here, saying "They've got a problem" and push them on to special ed and that's not what they need...this contributes to misrepresentation in special ed programs."

"Maybe that's the solution...giving them counseling instead of just putting them into special ed or doing a different type of assessment."

"They assess a lot of our African American kids...they assess them in what they think, what they believe, and a lot of them don't know or understand those kids."

"What I feel is that there's a way to assess kids for special ed and stop assessing kids that just need more attention or a different way of learning."

"They need to change the way they do the assessment."

"Dumping, that means that these folks are being thrown away. Are these (diagnoses) really accurate and correct to begin with?—what is the intention of diagnosing these folks?"

"Sometimes (the school system) just gets confused on what our children need...(they) can take assessment and do it the wrong way."

A theme which emerged among groups as a factor which contributed to misrepresentation in special education involved a general lack of trust felt on behalf of minority families. Although much of this appeared to stem from a poor level of communication between family members and school personnel, focus group members also discussed issues related to their opportunities to provide input in the education of their children and in the degree to which parent involvement activities were supported within schools. Participant comments with regard to these issues included:

"It comes down to trust...a lot of parents don't trust the system...and the system is nothing but these individuals who work with your children everyday."

"The communication with the parents...I don't know if parents feel alienated, there are ways staff can alienate you at times—I'm just saying these are the things that go into the mix of misrepresentation."

"Where is the parent's input in all this?...what happens in the home and the family dynamics are very important—this is fundamental child development."

"Because you are a working parent doesn't mean you're not concerned."

"It has to be made an open door type of thing...who needs to open this door? I don't know if that needs to be discussed on the level of districts, staff people, parents, whoever, to find out how to open this door."

"You have to have parents that are involved with their children...we have a lot of parents who are not involved with their children...they are leaving it up to the educational system and it's not working."

"More parental involvement and communication."

As a means of resolving problems related to the misrepresentation of minorities in special education programs, African American focus groups suggested that parents needed to engage in advocacy strategies to help ensure that their children were provided with needed services, but in a manner which did not promote misplacement. In addition, they also stressed the need for more training among regular education staff, helping them to better understand the purpose of special education and developing a greater awareness of socioeconomic conditions that contribute toward low academic achievement and impact one's ability to function in the educational setting. Specifically, focus group members identified needs in the areas of promoting parent involvement efforts in the schools and implementing strategies which resulted in an increased level of communication between the school and the families they serve. Focus group member comments included:

"Because I'm really involved and vocal...maybe I'm not visually seeing it (instruction of the child), but I'm on top of it and they know I'm going to check it out."

"Parents need to know their rights...information has to be more free flowing. Not just what the system can do, but what the parents can do as well. I feel now that information comes like pulling teeth."

"If a child is not making progress, then get the right people, get the right materials, or if you need to, go to PACER and have an advocate to go to these meetings with you—that's what you've got to do."

"For my child it works well because I challenge them—the number one piece is parent involvement—understanding and knowing what's really going on—that's what makes the difference."

"Teachers should be given more education in special ed. Just knowing about it in general so they will know which children need special ed...some kids just have something bothering them, like home problems."

"They (teachers) need to know the signs to make the right referrals and not put a child where they don't belong. I'm not saying the teachers try to do it consciously, but I think somewhere along the lines they are missing something in special education."

"You got some people who are quick to jump to conclusions and we don't need that in special ed...teachers and parents should not jump to that conclusion right away—nobody is going to benefit, not the teacher, not the student."

Throughout much of their discussion, focus group members emphasized the importance of parent involvement in the education of their children and the shared responsibilities which accompanied that role. Also, while they were able to identify a number of shortcomings within the educational system, many prefaced their comments by indicating their awareness of the difficulties often experienced by special education and regular education as a result of such factors as trying to address the educational needs of growing numbers of at-risk students, within a context of limited resources and financial support.

American Indian

In their discussions of aspects of special education they considered effective or what had "worked well" for them, American Indian focus groups indicated support for program models which included individualized instruction, tutorial support and early intervention. They emphasized that effectiveness was often enhanced when American Indian role models were included in the delivery of these services even though this seemed to occur with much less frequency than desired. In this regard, they frequently commented on the importance of having American Indian adults available within the school, functioning not only as role models to students, but as a resource which serves to maintain communication between home and school. In addition to the one-to-one direct services and small class sizes provided through special education services, focus group members indicated support for the protection afforded to them as a result of goals and objectives specified in the Individual Educational Plan. One member also suggested that Minnesota's Graduation Standards also provided a measure of assurance stating "I like the new thing now where children will not graduate unless they meet a certain criteria for graduation...so they are just not going to pass them on and they (get) stuck." Their comments on what they considered effective in special education included:

"He's in a small classroom setting...(it's) just the way they work with my child...it's consistent, a lot of one-on-one."

"The one-on-one...being with someone who is specifically working with her."

"Tutors work—a smaller classroom environment that has less distraction (and) facilitates learning with many kinds of disabilities. Another thing that works (is) when I actually go around and speak to the teachers individually and make them aware of her condition and the fact she does have an IEP."

"They have small groups. I think he likes the small groups. Before he didn't like to ask for help, but I think it's going to be better because it's smaller groups and I think it will be better for him in special education."

"I was very lucky I could get him into preschool and started to provide him services because the environment for learning has to begin at a very early age."

"He was in Head Start...after he had been identified, he had his own aide on a day-to-day basis, they have been together now for 5 years and I feel very fortunate. He (son's pupil support person) is Native American...our own tend to gravitate to one another."

"My daughter (is) getting along better and talks with the Indian advocate, she feels a lot better...she's doing a lot better in school because she gets to speak with an Indian advocate."

"Goal setting (on the IEP)—for one of my sons, it's working."

"Maybe all children should have an IEP...that would be my best world."

"After we got her assessed, (we developed) a very detailed IEP and trained her to be an advocate for herself. When there's a question (about her educational program) , you can say "It's in the IEP."

Perhaps the most recurring issue among American Indian focus groups were the challenges encountered which involved communications with the school and their desire to be better informed about the status of their children within the school setting and their rights as parents. This issue is comprised of two principal types of observations: (1) problems which occur as a result of ineffective existing systems of communication and processes used to disseminate information to parents, and (2) problems which occur because of a lack of opportunity to provide input to the process or because of barriers imposed by the educational system which limited access to information. One focus group member suggested that communication problems were not limited between home and school, rather communication was sometimes a problem within the school as well. Referring to a personal experience with his son, this focus group member said "the teacher (says) he is doing just fine, but (when) he goes to the next grade they say "What the heck did he do last year?" Another member suggested the need for "Better communication, not only between agencies but within the school district itself."

As an alternative to entirely depending on the educational system about meeting the instructional needs of their children, several focus group members indicated their primary source of information came from agencies from outside the local education agency, most notably Minnesota's Parent Advocacy Center for Educational Rights (PACER). These focus group members indicated that such agencies helped them to obtain useful information which they eventually used to advocate for their children and which helped them to more actively participate in the development of their child's educational plans. Focus group member comments about the general topic of communication included:

"I would appreciate a phone call once a week...more communication."

"The school district did not publish anything on IDEA...what they publish here is a very cursory (overview) of the IDEA...the Indian education people did not know about the manual until I gave them (a copy)."

"I've noticed that educators get a lot of information about special education...but not much gets to the parent and that which does isn't broken down in layman's terms...just get the information to them in a very basic way."

"Well, I've got two kids in special ed. I don't know what's happening with their assessment, my kids come home with loads of "F's" on their report card, but they never inform me about this. I have asked them repeatedly—if they've got a problem call me; send me a letter."

"The special education services is what is called the Study Skills room and they only go there for help with their regular education classes if they need it. They (regular education staff) might not even tell the special education teacher that they (their children) need help, so you'll get a report card with failing grades."

"Nothing up to this point has worked, except for the fact I've had the opportunity to get a lot of information from PACER through the Twin Cities...they have given me a lot of information that has helped me to write a better IEP for my son."

"In writing the IEP, I not only (received) help from PACER, but also the Minnesota Disability Law Center, which advocates for people with disabilities.

"I asked PACER to go with me; I wanted to know what his rights were."

"They (educators) are just trying to push the kid out of school. I mean, that's where the teacher-parent advocate is important. If it wasn't for PACER, who else would I have contacted?"

In discussions of what actions might be taken to resolve some of the problems identified by focus group members, there appeared to be some consensus that communication between home and school could be improved through the availability of an information liaison or contact person who could act independently and not necessarily as an employee of the school district. In another area related to the issue of communication, efforts to promote the involvement of parents in their child's education, particularly with the development of educational planning, appeared to be a theme which emerged from focus group discussions. In addition, focus group members stressed the importance of early intervention and promoting advocacy for both family members and students. Their comments included:

"You need someone centrally located to communicate with...you have parents being shuffled all around."

"My daughter has become an advocate for herself."

"You don't have an ombudsman that is autonomous—someone who you can go to."

"I think it's real helpful if you have a person that you know that's not under the strength of the school district to say "I'm having trouble with my daughter. What do I do?" You need that contact."

"More parental involvement...have a parent's day—make it special."

"You must have power to make school make the accommodations...an individual parent can be defeated by the school district—can be intimidated by the school district...empower parents."

"Intervention, if it occurs at all, does not occur early enough. I know of several situations where the parent knows there is something wrong, but they (the children) keep getting bumped along from year to year, to year...if the parent is strong enough and a good advocate, they will break through."

Focus group members also indicated the need to provide parents with more information about the due process system, including their rights and how parents can participate in the development and implementation of the IEP.

Latino

Latino focus group members indicated that one-to-one contact and the individualized instruction was one of the most worthwhile aspects of education, along with services provided by skilled teachers and other professionals (e.g., speech clinicians, nurses) who were able to make a positive impact on their child's learning. However, much of the discussion appeared to concentrate on issues which served as a barrier to services. Consistent with much of the literature regarding the types of problems encountered by Latinos whose children attend public school, language and language related issues are the predominate themes which pose the greatest challenges to educators and which appear to be the cause of much of the frustration experienced by parents. Statements excerpted from translated focus group transcripts included:

"It (special education services) has worked for my child because they work one-on-one."

"My child works with speech clinicians, nurses, various professionals and has made big progress."

"My kid gets the attention that he needs because they work with him one on one and the teacher is very good about teaching him and helping him."

"My little boy is smart, but at school he is not smart. There's something wrong with him all the time because we speak Spanish."

"Because we speak Spanish they think there's something wrong with them every time—just because we speak Spanish."

"When people come to the U.S. from a different country where kids speak another language and then they come here and have to learn everything in English, it's very difficult—and that's what I think is the reason for those statistics (MNCRIS statistics which show proportions of minorities placed in special education programs)."

"In my case, I don't see my child as having any problems, but they told me that he needs it, so I said "O.K." My husband and I both finished school and we kept studying although we barely passed, but we never had any problems. I think it's because of the language that they considered us having problems."

Issues involving cultural sensitivity appeared to be a frequent point of discussion among focus group members, suggesting that education professionals often demonstrate a lack of understanding of the Latino culture and the implications of their interactions with parents and students. Focus group members indicated that insensitivity was a problem that was observed in both regular and special education settings, but it is particularly critical for those who were involved in the assessment and placement decision-making process. However, even beyond problems associated with a lack of cultural awareness and understanding, a number of comments made by focus group participants indicated that discrimination was an area of concern, suggesting that this tended to contribute to the higher number of Latino students placed in special education programs and exacerbated whatever problems Latino students were already experiencing in their attempts to adjust to the school setting. For example, one area of concern was raised about the equity in the types of measures employed to resolve conflicts between Latino and other students in the schools. Based on the reports of some focus group members, Latino students are often first to be blamed for such incidents, and as a result, are more likely to be referred to Area Learning Centers and programs for students with emotional and behavioral problems. A translation of what focus group members stated included the following:

> *"The people who make the tests don't listen to the problems that the parents have. When children speak Spanish as their first language, they are expected to speak English too."*
>
> *"The professionals who test the children for this program should speak Spanish and the tests should be made in Spanish."*
>
> *"There are too many Hispanic children in special education—too many, possibly because of discrimination—it's not possible that in proportion there are so many children with problems when compared with white children."*
>
> *"A Mexican or Hispanic person has to struggle because he/she is not white and if he/she has a disability, the struggle is twice as hard."*
>
> *"Teachers and professionals don't know the Hispanic culture. At school, they tell me that I must think that my son is almost a man now and that soon he will go and live on his own. I have lived with my grandparents—that's my culture—I told those people that they should worry about what they teach my son at school and not to worry about what goes on in my home."*
>
> *"(Hispanic) parents raise kids to respect education, but teachers don't respect them."*
>
> *"Hispanic kids get in trouble because white kids pick on them—white kids take advantage."*

In addition to offering their views on the placement of students in special education programs, the topic of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction was also found to be frequently interwoven in the discussions among Latino focus group members. To some extent, their comments specifically targeted at ESL instruction seemed to parallel many of the concerns typically expressed about special education, including the efficacy of "pull-out" instruction and the stigmatizing effects of

classifying children as "different." To alleviate some of the problems identified in these discussions, there appeared to be a strong consensus among focus group members that more training needed to occur in the area of cultural awareness. In addition, participants also generated a number of recommendations and measures designed to improve communication between educators and Latino parents and which could be implemented to reduce stigmatizing students. Based on the translated transcripts, these recommendations included:

> *"Don't pull kids out (for ESL), that stigmatizes the children; others call them retarded."*
>
> *"When children speak Spanish, they do it without shame, but when they begin school they are made to feel ashamed, and later on they are shamed even more because they can't keep up with everybody else."*
>
> *"They really don't explain why kids are in ESL. They should explain test results and prove that Hispanic kids are doing worse than Anglo kids."*
>
> *"More time should be given for students to learn English and school staff should communicate more with parents."*
>
> *"They should create something like a mentoring program to help children with their homework."*
>
> *"Establish a Spanish or bilingual homework hotline. A lot of parents cannot speak—less read or write—English. How are they supposed to help their children with homework?"*

In addition to cultural awareness training for educators, implementing strategies to improve communication links with parents and families, and addressing problems related to ESL instruction, focus group members advocated for education staff who were bicultural or bilingual and who were available to administer and interpret assessment information to Latino students and families.

Combined Groups Summary

Individualized instruction and support services provided in a small classroom setting were two aspects of special education deemed most effective by African American, American Indian, and Latino focus groups. Although one of the main purposes was to obtain information regarding the topic of misrepresentation and to explore the challenges faced by minority populations with special education services, many focus group members had offered positive comments about their personal experiences with special education staff, including related services personnel (e.g., physical therapists, nurses, counselors). They also expressed strong support for the processes and practices involved with the planning and development of the Individual Education Program. For some, the IEP was seen as an effective tool which could be used to identify and develop goals and objectives to meet their child's education needs. For others, it was seen as a mechanism which secured and protected their rights against educational agencies that were perceived as unresponsive in their responsibilities to provide services.

While there appeared to be much commonality and intergroup agreement, each seemed to have their own emphasis within various key theme areas as well. In the

case of African American groups, much of the emphasis was placed on issues related to discrimination and racism, particularly in discussions about the misidentification of African American students in special education programs. In addition, African American focus groups were more likely than others to engage in discussions of problems and concerns relating to the assessment and placement process. Although they expressed an uncertainty about the validity of the assessment and speculated why a disproportionate number of African American youth were referred for testing, they did not seem to be in dispute with the assessment process itself. Rather, their concerns seemed to center on issues about whether the assessment actually led to accurate placements in special education, cautioning that assessments alone did not always reflect all aspects of a child's skills and abilities.

Members of the American Indian focus groups appeared to place more stress on the lack of communication which exists between the home and school which in some cases, seemed to lead to a lack of trust of the system in general. As a result, they appeared more likely than other groups to suggest that parents needed the support of advocacy groups such as PACER in order to ensure their rights were protected. Also, they tended to mention the importance of having an intermediary such as a home-school liaison and or counselor who could be accessed to mediate or provide support to parents and students. This role, however, was seen as most effective when the person was not under direct control of the school district staff. Similar to their reasons for seeking assistance from advocacy agencies outside the realm of the school, their comments about having access to someone with whom they could discuss their concerns also seemed to be related to the issue involving an apparent lack of effective communication between home and school.

Although the discussion of Latino focus groups also included issues related to discrimination, their primary emphasis appeared to be on the lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity in the schools and the negative consequences which often resulted for Latino youth. In addition, language issues also arose quite frequently among focus group members and for some, it was one of the driving forces which contributed to misrepresentation in special education programs. As one parent indicated "Because we speak Spanish they think there's something wrong with (us) every time—just because we speak Spanish."

Staff training in the area of cultural awareness and establishing effective communication links between home and school, and implementing activities which promoted parent involvement appeared to be the three main areas where a consensus could be seen when the parent focus groups were asked about the types of initiatives that were needed in the future. However, based on their discussions in the area of cultural awareness and sensitivity, it appeared that many of the comments made by focus group members were more heavily concentrated in areas which involved overt and covert forms of racism and discrimination rather than issues specific to cultural diversity.

Analysis of Professional and Parent Groups

In an examination of key issues identified in Phase I focus groups of professional staff and parents, there appeared to be several areas where a consensus exists

with regard to "what works," "what doesn't work," "contributing factors," and "needs for the future." Both professional and parent focus groups saw tutorial and small group instruction as something that "worked" for minority students, but not always in the context of being delivered through special education services. Recognizing that their children were experiencing academic difficulties, several parents indicated they sought outside help in the form of a private tutor, or had made sure their child was receiving other types of nonspecial education support (e.g., study hall, counseling) available within the school and community. In addition to their emphasis on small class sizes and tutorial instruction, when asked "What Works?," parent groups also stressed the value of individualized, one-to-one instruction that was available though special education. Also, parents within all three types of focus groups mentioned the importance of goal setting and providing students with learning objectives. In most cases, these comments were made in reference to the Individual Educational Plan (IEP), although some indicated that having specific goals and objectives should be part of every student's educational program.

Although focus groups of professionals tended to emphasize the use of team approach to decision-making and the importance of parent and family involvement in this process, much of the dialogue about "What doesn't work?," obtained from parent groups show that few see themselves as contributing members of their child's educational planning team. Perhaps due in part to problems identified in the areas of home-school communication and their perceptions of limited opportunities for parent involvement, the experience of many of those who participated in parent focus groups seemed to indicate that the team approach was not something that necessarily "worked" for them, even though they were in clear agreement that parent involvement was an integral part of the planning process. For some parents, their level of involvement often seemed to be related to their ability to advocate for their child, either through initiatives taken on their own or by seeking assistance from such organizations such as PACER as a means of informing staff of their child's learning needs or to ensure that stated IEP goals and objectives were being implemented as planned.

When focus groups of professionals and parents discussed factors which contributed to misrepresentation and disproportionate placement of minority youth in special education programs, parent groups were much more likely to indicate that racism and discrimination played a large role. Although professional groups also indicated that racism and attitudes were contributing factors, they generally tended to discuss this subject in terms of a lack of cultural awareness many educators had with regard to family dynamics and emphasized the impact of poverty and social stressors experienced by a number of minority students. Although observations of this nature were also present in parent focus groups, the emphasis on overt forms of racism and discrimination seemed to resonate more intensely with them than with groups of professionals. In their discussions of factors which contributed to disproportionate representation, professionals tended to emphasize problems related to assessment practices and problems associated with defining the roles and responsibilities of regular and special education.

In general, there appeared to be a strong consensus among focus groups of professionals and parents with regard to actions which are needed in the future to ad-

dress problems associated with disproportionate representation. Both groups frequently indicated the need to implement staff development initiatives in the areas of cultural awareness and diversity training. Although such training was recommended for both regular and special education staff, some parents specifically mentioned the need to train regular education staff as a way of helping to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education. Also, parent groups suggested that regular education teachers needed to be more informed about the role of special education and how to identify and refer students for services.

Action Plan

The action plan outlined in the following section represents a culmination of issues and concerns emerging from focus groups involved in both Phase I and Phase II of this effort. Based on a process first used in Phase I, these issues and concerns were synthesized into various priority "need" areas and then transformed into operational objectives. Since many of the key issues identified by focus groups of parents and professionals converged with a fairly high degree of consistency, it was possible to condense many of these issues in five core need areas; these include:

Need Area 1: To promote awareness of cultural and social dynamics that impact school achievement.

Need Area 2: To develop and implement effective home and school communication links with minority families.

Need Area 3: To promote practices and procedures which increase the availability of minority staff at all levels of the educational system.

Need Area 4: To clearly define the roles and responsibilities of regular and special education in the provision of services to minority students.

Need Area 5: To develop and implement assessment models and identification practices which meet the needs of minority students.

While a high level of agreement was found with regard to the overall needs indicated as a result of key issues identified by both parent and professional groups, these groups could often show differences in terms of the types of issues emphasized within each need area. For example, racism and discrimination issues raised by parent groups contributed to the development of the need area to "promote awareness of cultural and social dynamics which impact school achievement," while the concerns of professional groups in this same area were rooted more strongly in issues involving cultural insensitivity and staff development efforts to increase awareness among education professionals. It is important to note that the needs identified as a result of this effort not only reflect priorities within Minnesota, but are highly relevant to what has been observed on a national level as well. This is best exemplified in the policy forum report *Disproportionate Representation: A Critique of State and Local Strategies*, a study conducted on behalf of the National Associate of State Directors of Special Education (Markowitz, 1996). Similar to the needs indicated by Phase I and Phase II focus groups in this report, a national panel of educators, advocates, state and federal government officials also indicated that priority needs existed in the areas of professional development, parent in-

volvement, recruitment of staff which reflected greater level of diversity, and increased collaboration between the areas of regular and special education.

As each need area was transformed into an operational objective, it was often accompanied with one or more activities or strategies which could be implemented to address the need of that objective. In some cases, these activities more directly related to key issues generated by Phase I and Phase II focus groups and others were broader in scope, reflecting needs identified through contemporary research findings and were intended to address longer range capacity-building initiatives. To some extent, the action plan is "developmental," reflecting activities which are being proposed for the future and those which are in various stages of implementation. In its present form, the action plan serves as an operational framework and is best thought of as a starting point, or "staging area" for future initiatives or for evaluating current efforts. Also, it is likely that some of the proposed activities will undergo modifications and revisions as part of the decision-making process. Although one intent of the action plan is to present a comprehensive range of strategies, it does not necessarily reflect all of the initiatives which have already occurred or are currently being undertaken by CFL or in collaboration with other state agencies. Finally, while the plan is designed as an overall blueprint to guide future efforts, it does not directly address issues related to resources and funding. Rather, it is anticipated that funding sources will be clarified as objectives are refined and prepared for implementation. In doing so, it is anticipated that both state and federal funding sources can be used to implement many aspects of the plan, depending on whether federal funding sources can be secured to implement activities which are intended to impact a broader, national audience. The five objectives, along with proposed activities based on the findings of educational research are outlined below:

■ **Objective 1**

Promote awareness of cultural and social dynamics that impact school achievement.

Additional efforts are needed in the development and implementation of in-service and pre-service training strategies aimed at helping teachers and other professionals gain a better understanding of the norms and unique characteristics of persons who represent diverse cultural groups. Although no one set of characteristics can be attributed to any member of *any* group, researchers (Cloud & Landurand, 1988; Johnson and Ramirez, 1987; Taylor, 1989) have developed some useful guidelines which need to be considered in communicating with individuals of differing cultural backgrounds. For example, according to Cloud & Landurand, (1988), "rules for touching others vary from culture to culture. They provide similar examples for "sharing space," "eye contact," and "time ordering of interaction." They have developed a multicultural training program which helps educators to use cultural information to make inferences about special education needs. Research about the unique learning styles of minority youth (Ramirez and Castaneda, 1974) serves as another example of the many resources available to promote cultural awareness and the implications it has for addressing the needs of minority youth and their families.

In her article, Multicultural Education Training for Special Educators Working with African American Youth, Ford (1992) asserts that specialized training must be provided to help special educators provide service from a multicultural framework. Suggesting that "many educators have not given a high priority to the positive recognition of individual differences relating to cultural backgrounds and attitudes, worldviews, values and beliefs, interests, culturally conditioned learning styles, personality, verbal and nonverbal language patterns, and behavior response mechanisms," she proposes that multicultural services include the following experiences:

- Engaging teachers in self-awareness activities to explore their attitudes and perceptions concerning their cultural group and beliefs—as well as the effects of their attitudes in terms of self-concept, academic abilities, and educational experiences.
- Exposing teachers to accurate information about various cultural ethnic groups (e.g., historical and contemporary contributions; lifestyles and value systems; interpersonal communication patterns; learning styles; parental attitudes about education and disabilities).
- Helping educators to explore the diversity that exists between, as well as within, cultural ethnic groups.
- Showing teachers how to apply and incorporate multicultural perspectives in the teacher-learning process to maximize the academic, cognitive, personal and social development of learners (e.g., assessment, curriculum; and instructional management, strategies, and materials.
- Demonstrating effective interactions among teachers, students, and family members.
- Providing training and technical assistance to special education teachers to manifest appropriate application of cultural information to create a healthy learning climate.

Although not directly linked with the topical area of multicultural education, a task force group responsible for this objective may wish to further explore issues of racism and discrimination raised by parent focus groups. Whether efforts should be directed at defining the dimensions of this concept or engaging in data collection activities to ascertain to what extent racism and discrimination exists in the schools, some effort must be made to see how pervasive this perception is among parents, students, and educators themselves to determine what action plan activities can be developed to address this area of concern. Promoting awareness of cultural and social dynamics is a major component of the new assessment guidelines that are currently being developed by the Division of Special Education.

■ Objective 2

Develop and implement effective home and school communication links and parent involvement activities with minority parents and families.

Various researchers (Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Marion, 1982) have offered suggestions about improving communication with minority families. For example, to facilitate communication with families who speak a language other than English, these researchers offer some straightforward guidelines which can be used by all types of educators:

1) *Send messages home in the parent's native language.*
2) *Use an appropriate reading level.*
3) *"Listen" to the messages being returned.*

According to Johnson & Ramirez (1987) "courtesy, sincerity, and ample opportunity and time to convey concerns can promote communication and participation by parents from different cultural backgrounds." They also recommend that educators should "support parents as they learn how to participate in the system," by adopting the role of advocate and encouraging parental participation at home. Data from focus groups indicate that home and school links are often improved by the availability of a home-school liaison who is also a member of the same minority group and is familiar with the cultural context of both school and family systems. A task force assigned to address this objective might be to examine ways these and similar strategies can be applied to increase communication and family involvement in order to recommend "best practice" guidelines which can be used by educators and other professional staff. Also, these guidelines can be disseminated to pre-service programs throughout Minnesota so they can be used in the training of future educators.

Based on the responses of parent focus groups, activities which promote parent involvement are important and needed and also a necessary component to this objective. Recently, studies and demonstration projects which have been conducted in this area have shown that many different approaches can be used to promote the involvement of African American (Tanksley, 1995), American Indian (Sears & Medearis, 1993; Nelson, 1992), and Latino (Sosa, 1996; Chavkin, 1996; Chavkin and Gonzalez, 1995) parents and families. Also, the extensive body of knowledge in the field of parent involvement accumulated as a result of efforts of Joyce Epstein and associates (1992, 1993, 1995, 1996) can also be sources of information which can be used to promote parent involvement of minority parents and families in the schools. Also, White-Clark and Decker (Undated Manuscript) and Decker (1994; 1996) offer a number of recommended strategies to help educators increase parent and family involvement in their child's educational program.

In an effort to strengthen communication links between home and school, the Division of Special Education (in cooperation with the Office of Indian Education and the Office of LEP Education) will implement a plan to provide training to home-school liaisons within the African American community. Based on the successful models of home-school communication which have emerged as a result of programs which have been implemented over the past two decades with Native American and bilingual liaisons, training will be provided to address communication problems which currently exist between African American families and schools. Also, the division has engaged in an extensive process of translating due process materials in various language formats (e.g., Somali, Hmong, Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, Spanish, and Russian) to help inform parents and families of their educational rights and to facilitate communication about the special education process between home and school.

■ **Objective 3**

Promote practices and procedures which increase the availability of minority staff at all levels of the educational system.

The absence of minority personnel in education was noted by those who participated in the parent focus groups, where it was suggested there were insufficient numbers of persons to whom students could look to as role models and mentors. In addition, they indicated there were few minority persons available to serve students as advocates, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and assessment personnel. One focus group member said "I believe there's not enough minorities to work with children who do need special education," while another stated "To be honest, I haven't seen an Indian teacher in this city yet...is there any? I've never seen one." Comments of this nature were also recorded in Phase I, where professionals noted that the availability of minority staff has not kept pace with the rapidly changing demographics in the metropolitan school system. As a result, the relative disproportion of minority to non-minority staff has been a source of concern not only from the standpoint of establishing role models for youth, but also from the perspective of achieving what one focus group member referred to as "cultural competence."

A task force assigned to accomplish this objective might study and recommend strategies ensuring that the interests of minority youth and families are fully represented on planning teams. Also, persons working on this objective may wish to collaborate with other state agencies to study strategies that will promote the identification, recruitment, and retention of minorities within the educational community. Resources to study this issue might include that of the North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL, 1990), a research lab that tracked the recruitment of minority teachers in the Midwest states, including Minnesota. In addition to providing information about minority recruitment efforts within these states, the NCREL also offers strategies which have been implemented to address this issue. Other resources such as Ramirez (1990) and Obiakor and Utley (1993) may also be consulted to further examine issues related to recruitment and retention and preservice and in-service training.

■ **Objective 4**

Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of regular and special education in the provision of services to minority students.

Even with the increasing emphasis on such strategies as the use of regular education prereferral interventions and inclusive educational practices in the past decade, the role of special education is still often seen as the only option for students who struggle with academics or who exhibit what have been termed as "hard to teach" behaviors. This theme was clearly conveyed by Phase I focus group members along with the attendant problem of having to label minority youth in order for them to receive assistance. While the parent focus groups involved in Phase II did not explicitly discuss issues related to defining the roles of regular and special educa-

tion, it was also clear from their comments that they supported the notion of tutorial and small group instruction and that such support did not always have to be delivered in a special education setting. Members of these groups discussed several alternatives, including specialized study halls staffed by content area teachers, Section 504 plans, assistance provided by private tutors and agencies such as Sylvan Learning Centers, and support services available through home-school liaison and counseling staff.

While this objective is complex and to some degree contingent upon the outcomes of other objectives involved in this operational framework, persons who assume responsibility for this objective can engage in an ongoing process to help identify equally effective instructional alternatives other than special education. One objective might be to develop a process (e.g., needs assessment) schools can use to determine the range of alternatives which currently exist in order to identify options that might meet the educational needs of minority youth. The Division of Special Education has addressed the issue of defining the roles of regular and special educators through its referral and assessment projects carried out during the 1996-97 year. A similar initiative planned for the 1997-98 year will also address this objective area.

- **Objective 5**

  Develop and implement assessment models and identification practices which meet the needs of minority students.

  As has been suggested by a number of researchers (Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Swedo, 1987) and observed by several members of the various focus groups, it is not an uncommon practice for some educators to continuously administer assessments until a learning or behavioral disability is "found." Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls (1987) state that "what is required to reverse the so-called legitimizing function of assessment can be termed an advocacy orientation." Using language differences as an example, they recommend a more thoughtful approach to determining and applying eligibility criteria to students from minority groups by focusing on:

  1) the extent to which children's language and culture are incorporated into the school program;
  2) the extent to which non-English speaking children are encouraged to use both their first and second languages actively in the classroom to amplify their experiences in interacting with other children and adults; and
  3) the extent to which educators collaborate with parents in a shared enterprise.

  Based on comments by focus group members involved in Phase I activities, direct, functional assessment, performance-based measures and controlled learning trials are techniques which might be used more consistently as an alternative to current approaches. In their book, Assessment and Placement of Minority Students, Samuda, Kong, Cummins, Lewis, and Pascual-Leone (1991) provide a comprehensive outline of strategies which can be used by educational agencies to develop and implement policies with regard to the assessment and placement of minority

students in special education programs. Those involved in parent focus groups in Phase II also expressed their concerns about assessment, questioning whether the amount of assessment that is presently being done is really necessary and whether it meets the educational needs of children. Rather than voicing opposition to the assessment process, participants of parent focus groups tended to concentrate on how well assessment results reflected the child as a whole. As one parent stated, "Do your testing and do your formal assessment, but there's a lot more to that child than the assessment."

In response to the issues and concerns which prompted this objective, the Division of Special Education has formed a task force to draft guidelines for assessing American Indian and African American students. It is worthwhile to note that the guidelines developed by this incorporated various recommendations made by focus group members with regard to such subject areas as promoting the utilization of home-school liaisons, implementing parent involvement strategies, and increasing cross-cultural understanding of diverse groups within society. By using a task force approach to address this objective, current assessment procedures and policies can be reviewed and revised in order to make "best practice" recommendations for teachers and related personnel.

The five objectives described on the above action plan are not offered as a definitive, "quick fix" to a problem that is by nature difficult and complex, nor does it intend to delineate the full range of actions that will ultimately be needed to achieve a satisfactory resolution to the issue of disproportionate representation of minority youth within special education programs. It does, however, represent a plan which clearly moves beyond "admiring the problem" by articulating a framework that is focused on action-oriented strategies and results. As such, it is an important first step that should be taken to ensure that all minority students are afforded with quality programs that effectively meet their educational needs, but accomplished in a manner that demonstrates cultural competence.

Summary of Key Issues

The following information represents a summary listing of key areas, concerns, and issues expressed by focus groups in response to the following questions: (1) What works in special education? (2) What does not work? (3) What factors contribute to misrepresentation? (4) What are some solutions? The list is organized according to the responses of each cultural focus group.

African American

What works?

- Individualized, one-to-one instruction
- Individual Education Plan
- Tutorial, small group instruction
- Parent advocacy
- Parent and family involvement
- Targeted goals and objectives for students
- Communication with family
- Focusing on student strengths

What does not work?

- Assessment practices
- Placement process and labeling of students
- Home-school communication
- Current efforts used to inform and involve parents
- Relying too much on special education to address underachievement
- Failing to notify parents of placement in school programs

What factors contribute to misrepresentation?

- Not recognizing cultural issues
- Racism and discrimination
- Assuming students have academic problems based on race
- Services promised, but never materialized
- Referring and assessing too soon
- Lack of communication and trust
- Lack of collaborative efforts

What are solutions?

- Regular education teachers need training in identification and referral
- Improve communication between home and schools
- Promote parent involvement in the schools and child's educational program
- Focus efforts on early intervention and prevention

- Improve assessment procedures

American Indian

What works?

- Involvement of parents and special education staff
- Consistency, small classes, one-to-one support
- Goal setting for student, tutorial support
- Due process rights and protections
- Early intervention services provided in the home
- After school activities
- Culturally sensitive educators
- American Indian advocate/role models in education
- Advocacy groups (e.g., PACER, Minnesota Disability Law Center)

What does not work?

- Large, intimidating team meetings
- Current efforts used to inform and involve parents
- Communication among educators within the district
- Assessment process is long, complicated, and confusing
- Assuming American Indian students need special education

What factors contribute to misrepresentation?

- Socioeconomic status/poverty
- Different cultural values
- Teachers not aware of culture and family dynamics

What are solutions?

- Improving communication between home and school
- Sponsor an open forum with educators to discuss issues
- Training for parents on their role in the educational planning process
- Empowerment of American Indian parents
- Support Minnesota Graduation Requirement initiatives
- Promote parent involvement efforts within the schools

Latino

What works?

- Individualized, one-to-one instructional support
- Caring teachers
- Educational programs that help, but don't shame dual language students
- Bilingual/bicultural staff

What does not work?

- Children get pulled from classrooms
- Educators do not explain why students are in ESL
- Stigmatizing special education labels
- Current efforts used to inform and involve parents

What factors contribute to misrepresentation?

- Too many Latinos identified for special education because of language
- People who administer tests do not speak Spanish
- Discrimination because students have different language/culture

What are solutions?

- School staff should be trained in Latino culture, family dynamics
- Increase current levels of communication between home and family
- Create a mentoring program to help student with homework
- Professionals who test students should speak Spanish
- Test administered to students should be available in Spanish versions
- Students should be provided with incentives to encourage learning

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Addressing Minority Overrepresentation in Special Education: Cultural Barriers to Effective Collaboration.

Pamela Luft—Paper presented at the Annual International Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (73rd, Indianapolis, IN, April 5-9, 1995).

This paper examines the cultural differences that arise because of disability, ethnicity, and social status and their impact on assessment practices, programming, goal setting, and the special education processes established by legislation, especially in light of the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. Suggestions for resolving existing cultural barriers include encouraging parent groups to become involved and providing professionals with culturally competent information and suggested practices. The paper considers the conceptual discrepancies and cultural barriers that exist between minority families and the special education system. Overrepresentation of minorities in special education is discussed in terms of historical patterns, assessment procedures, and legal suits and legislation. A section on definitions and stratifications considers minority classifications, disability categories, and class and status categories. Parental rights in special education as documented by court litigation and legislation are reviewed. Existing cultural differences are identified through consideration of typically American cultural values, contrasting values of identity, contrasting views of disability, and contrasting views of relationships. Implications of cultural differences for parental involvement in the schools are discussed. Specific recommendations to increase parental involvement are offered.

Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education: A Continuing Debate

Alfredo J. Artiles and Stanley C. Trent—Journal-of-Special-Education; v27 n4 p410-37 Win 1994 Special Issue: Theory and Practice of Special Education: Taking Stock a Quarter Century after Deno and Dunn.

This article reviews historically the overrepresentation of Latino and African American students in special education; examines the influence of court cases, debate about systemic issues, demographic and socioeconomic changes, the construction of minority students' school failure, and the fallacy of the cultural diversity-disability analogy; and offers solutions.

The Effects of Placement Litigation on Psychological and Education Classification

Daniel J. Reschly—Diagnostique; v17 n1 p6-20 Fall 1991

This article reviews the evolution of placement litigation based on the overrepresentation of minority students in special educational programs for students with mild disabilities, provides commentaries on four court trials that have yielded judicial opinion and discusses the implications of this litigation for the reform of special education services.

State Data Collection and Monitoring Procedures Regarding Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education. Project FORUM.

Julia Lara—Report presented to the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Alexandria, VA.

This report presents results of a study describing current state policies and practices to minimize or reduce inappropriate placements of minority students in special education. States were surveyed to obtain information about changes in their procedures for collecting data by race/ethnicity and their procedures to monitor local districts where overrepresentation is identified. The analysis is built on a 1991 study by the staff of the Arkansas Department of Education. Findings are discussed and illustrated in tabular form. Administrative practices are described for six states that have developed formal follow-up procedures subsequent to a finding of overrepresentation in a local district. These states are Arkansas, California, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania. The analysis concludes that, although there has been an increase in the number of states that collect child count data by race/ethnicity, few states have mechanisms for addressing the overrepresentation issue once a district is suspected of having some disproportionality. Three recommendations are offered to address this issue: (1) data should be collected by all states by gender, race, and ethnicity; (2) further analysis of state enrollment data is needed to get a more accurate picture of the state dimensions of this problem; and (3) collaboration should continue among government, experts, and stakeholders to support the development of solutions to this problem.

Educational Needs of Minorities with Disabilities

Frederick Bedell—In Wright, Tennyson J., Ed.; Leung, Paul, Ed. The Unique Needs of Minorities with Disabilities: Setting an Agenda for the Future. Conference Proceedings (Jackson, Mississippi, May 6-7).

This paper by a public school teacher and elected official with 32 years experience in public education discusses the placement of minority students and service delivery to minorities in special education programs in public school systems. The paper argues that various school practices often cause a disproportionate placement of minorities in special education programs and that a number of societal factors make the problems of at-risk minority students even more difficult and unpredictable. In addition, the demographic revolution of the past decade has brought about a degree of linguistic and cultural diversity that profoundly influences the country's social institutions. Schools are ill-equipped to deal with language minority students because of inadequate teacher training or inappropriate curricula, and, as a consequence, those stu-

dents are placed in special education programming, as are many minority youngsters at-risk for other reasons, such as low self-esteem, peer pressure, inappropriate curricula, negative home environment, and, in some cases, a hostile school climate. It is proposed, however, that general education programs properly adapted can serve a large number of students currently placed in special education programs. Recommendations are made to prevent the overrepresentation of minorities in special programs and to improve the placement process of children with special needs, and systems to assure adequate service delivery for this population is presented. A reaction paper by Tennyson J. Wright adds to these recommendations, noting that educators need to be educated about the real America of minority populations; that Americans need to develop an appreciation of differences as human and natural; and that a liberal education of inclusion relative to racial, cultural, gender, disability, class, and language differences needs to be developed. A second reaction paper, by Julian Castillo, points out that an understanding of the sub-groups encompassed in the term Latino is needed, that programs need to address the issue of accountability, and that effective preschool programs and individual service planning are needed for minority group students.

Exploring Education Issues of Cultural Diversity.

Federal Regional Resource Center—A report by the Federal Regional Resource Center (1991).

For a project designed to increase understanding of cultural diversity in the United States as a preliminary to meeting the educational needs of all the country's children, 42 professionals and parents were asked to identify the critical issues in the education of children from minority backgrounds. Over 200 issues were identified in 8 areas: (1) administration and policy; (2) attitudes and bias; (3) training and personnel; (4) curriculum and instruction; (5) assessment; (6) society and community; (7) parents and families; and (8) funding. Selected issues raised by respondents indicated that, among other problems: (1) school organization is not effective in dealing with diversity; (2) the current educational system has a mainstream bias which adversely affects minority students; (3) educators are not receiving appropriate training in this area and teacher educators also lack the needed knowledge and skills; (4) current instruction, curricula, materials/methods and service delivery models are inadequate; (5) inadequate assessment has led to overrepresentation or underrepresentation of minority students in various educational programs; (6) increased collaboration within the community is needed; (7) parental involvement needs to be encouraged and increased; and (8) funding for all schools should be equalized. All the issues identified are listed in the report under the eight categories. Concluding sections offer additional thoughts, a description of the data collection process, a directory of the respondents, and a listing of respondents by the ethnic groups with which they are concerned.

Policy Implications of Differential Status among Latino Subgroups

Emily Arcia and James J. Gallagher—The Transdisciplinary Journal; v4 n2 p65-73 June 1994

The issue of overrepresentation of minority groups in special education is discussed. The example of Mexican American and Puerto Rican children is used to illustrate that overrepresentation is justified and desirable if the relative need of the children in the groups differs in developmental and functional status. Policy implications are discussed.

Bilingualism and Psychometrics

R. A. Figueroa—Diagnostique; v17 n1 p70-85 Fall 1991

This article reviews literature asserting that legal mandates eliminating overrepresentation in special education classes may have hurt minority children and argues that such a position ignores the impact of bilingualism on psychometric test performance. The article proposes that psychometric tests be excluded from any aspect of decision making with bilingual populations.

Alarming or Disarming?: The Status of Ethnic Differences within Exceptionalities.

Alan W. Coulter—Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (74th, Orlando, FL, April 1-5, 1996).

This paper examines the issue of disproportion and related controversies of ethnic representation within exceptionalities in special education programs using 1993-94 data on African-American and White students from a southern state. The study defined a significant disproportion as an ethnic representation in a disability category which exceeded 10 percent of the group's representation in the general public school population. A significant disproportion for the gifted and talented category was determined whenever the ethnic representation was less than 10 percent of the group's representation in the general school population. Results indicated that 28 of the 66 local education agencies (LEAs) showed disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education overall. In traditional socially determined disabilities (learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, and mental disabilities), 62 of the 66 LEAs showed disproportionate numbers of African-American students in these programs. In traditional biologically determined disabilities (orthopedic, deaf, and visually impaired), the disproportionate representation for African Americans was found to be substantially lower. Additional data indicate varying degrees of disproportionate representation in the categories of speech impairments, other health impaired, autistic, multiple disabilities, hard of hearing, and noncategorical preschool. Additionally, 59 of the LEAs showed disproportionate underrepresentation of African-American students in gifted and talented programs.

Disproportionate Representation: A Critique of State and Local Strategies. Policy Forum Report

Joy Markowitz—Project FORUM, Washington, DC (September 14-15, 1995). Final Report.

This document reports on the purpose, implementation, and outcomes of a policy forum on strategies used to address the disproportionate number of students from minority ethnic/racial groups receiving special education. Participants included representatives of state education agencies, local education agencies, the university/research community, general education, the Office for Civil Rights, and advocacy groups. The policy forum's purpose was to critique preliminary findings of a case-study investigation in three states and to identify specific strategies for addressing the disproportionate representation problem. Strategies were identified for the following six areas: (1) the importance of school staff trained to work with culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse students and recruitment of staff reflecting this diversity; (2) the need for ongoing professional development opportunities for school personnel in such areas as positive classroom management, effective instructional practices, and non-biased assessment; (3) the need to inform and involve communities in addressing issues of disproportionality; (4) the need for involving parents early in the child's school career; (5) the need for closer collaboration between general and special educators; and (6) the need for special education data, disaggregated by race/ethnic group, to understand disproportionality and focus strategies. A list of forum participants and the agenda are attached.

Disproportionate Representation of Students from Minority Ethnic/Racial Groups in Special Education: A Policy Forum To Develop Action Plans for High Priority Recommendations

Joy Markowitz—Project FORUM, Pentagon City, Virginia (August 25-26, 1994). Final Report

This paper reports on the design, purpose, implementation, and outcomes of a policy forum on disproportionate representation of students from minority ethnic/racial groups in special education. The purpose of this policy forum was to develop an action agenda for implementation of two recommendations assigned a high priority by a group of stakeholders: (1) prereferral strategies should be an integral part of the educational process and should be made available to service providers prior to the initiation of a formal assessment, and training should be provided in this area; and (2) training should be provided to address the diverse learning strengths and needs of an increasing heterogeneous student population, including training in the area of parent/professional collaboration, and family members from different ethnic/racial backgrounds should be used as resources. Two speakers offered remarks: Robert Solomon on prereferral strategies and Beth Harry on home-school collaboration. Forum participants then identified compelling reasons to implement the recommendations, barriers to implementation, and critical components of an implementation plan. Appendixes contain a participant list, a list of background materials for the forum, an agenda, and tips for successful prereferral. (JDD)

Involving Hispanic Parents in Improving Educational Opportunities for Their Children

Alicia Salinas Sosa—In Children of La Frontera: Binational Efforts To Serve Mexican Migrant and Immigrant Students

Traditionally, school personnel have expressed concern about the relatively poor record of involving Hispanic parents in schools. The root of the problem is that many immigrant and migrant Hispanic parents cherish beliefs and expectations different from those held by schools and by the parents whom schools most frequently engage. This chapter examines barriers to Hispanic parents' participation and strategies for cultivating more successful experiences with these parents. Barriers to the involvement of migrant and immigrant parents include: (1) logistical barriers (lack of time, financial pressures, migrants' fear of the community, lack of child care, and the segmented nature of public education); (2) attitudinal barriers (parents' uncertainties about their role in school, disagreements over school policy, parents' dissatisfaction with their own ability to help their children academically, and home-school communication problems); and (3) expectations barriers (school disregard of family's recent arrival, social or ethnic bias of school, and parents' perceptions of bias). Strategies that support the involvement of migrant and immigrant parents include flexible scheduling, providing transportation and child care, home visits, including extended family and community, parent workshops on expectations and roles, respect for parents, providing translators and bilingual school information, recognizing parents as contributors and collaborators, and basing programs on assessed needs. Overall, successful programs have stopped viewing parents as deficient, include parents as equal partners, and treat families with understanding and with high regard.

The Disproportionate Representation of Minority Students in Special Education: Theories and Recommendations.

Beth Harry Project FORUM. Final Report.

This reports offers a synthesis of the current knowledge and theoretical positions concerning the disproportionate representation of minorities in special education. It is divided into five broad sections: (1) an introduction which clarifies the terminology and purpose of the report; (2) an overview of the position of minority students in the nation's education system; (3) a description of the pervasiveness and patterns of disproportionate placement, including an analysis of data from the Office for Civil Rights and the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students; (4) an outline and discussion of the various explanations or interpretations that have been offered for this phenomenon (including characteristics of the students, biases in the assessment process, and characteristics of students' homes and communities); and (5) recommendations. The report finds no single reason for disproportionate representation but does find that continuing educational and social inequities combine to place poor minority students at particular disadvantage. Recommendations address: the collection and use of data on disproportionate representation; disbanding the classification system; restructuring for a unified system of special and regular education; restructuring for prevention of failure and the redress of disad-

vantage; assessment in context, for the purpose of modifying and improving services; curriculum and instruction in context; grouping students in schools; and schools as community resources.

Preventing Inappropriate Referrals of Language Minority Students to Special Education. Occasional Papers in Bilingual Education.

Shernaz B Garcia. and Alba A. Ortiz—NCBE New Focus; n5 Jun 1988

It is often difficult to distinguish those students with learning problems due to individual differences in learning styles or achievement difficulties from those students with specific disorders; failure to do so sometimes results in inappropriate referral of language minority students to special education. It also contributes to disproportionate representation of those students in special education. These children suffer from the stigma of being labeled handicapped and may lose ground academically. Formal prereferral intervention is recommended, governed by a clearly articulated set of procedures followed by all personnel. Teacher assistance teams can be used to facilitate prereferral problem-solving. This process provides valuable insights for classroom teachers and team members regarding potential sources of student difficulties and can help distinguish learning problem types. At each step of the process, specific questions should address such issues as the problem; curricula and instructional materials; teacher characteristics; teaching style; teacher expectations and perceptions; student characteristics such as language proficiency, culture, and socioeconomic status; exposure to the curriculum; evaluation of instructional effectiveness; and alternative interventions. Prereferral intervention in which the major objective is to improve the effectiveness of regular education is a cost-effective approach.

Preparing Special Education and Related Services Personnel To Serve Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children with Handicaps: Needs and Future Directions

Bruce A. Ramirez—ERIC Document: ED 343341

This paper outlines the need to diversify the education profession at practitioner, administrative, and personnel preparation levels in order to better serve culturally and linguistically diverse children with disabilities. Needs identified include developing effective recruitment and retention programs for members of ethnic minority groups; ensuring that competencies related to culturally and linguistically diverse children with handicaps are an integral component of special education and related services preparation programs; strengthening training and leadership programs preparing ethnic minority special education and related services personnel as well as personnel serving culturally and linguistically diverse children with handicaps; and initiating research and demonstration projects to improve curriculum, competencies, and training.

Rethinking Preservice and Inservice Training Programs for Teachers in the Learning Disabilities Field: Workable Multicultural Models. Special Issue.

Festus E. Obiakor and Cheryl A. Utley

This paper discusses the need to rethink preservice and inservice training programs for general and special educators who teach culturally diverse students with learning disabilities. An overview identifies problems associated with traditional preservice and inservice training programs, such as Eurocentric teacher education programs and low teacher expectations of minority students. The following model teacher development programs are reviewed: "Bilingual/ESOL Special Education INFUSION," "Bilingual Special Education Interagency Collaboration Project," "Multisystem: Systematic Instructional Planning for Exceptional Bilingual Students," "Culture: Differences? Diversity! Inservice Program," "Project Partnership," and "Training in America's Multicultural Schools (Project TEAMS)." Barriers to systemic programmatic infusion of these successful programs are identified, including a lack of involvement by minority faculty and staff and implications of the transfer of funding authority to state and local authorities. A discussion of multicultural competencies for regular and special educators presents case studies to illustrate how traditional inservice training, labeling, misidentification procedures, low teacher expectations, and teacher-student interactions affect the outcomes for culturally diverse and at-risk students with learning disabilities. Proactive nontraditional strategies are proposed, involving new ways of thinking; curricular changes; modification and infusion of courses; testing, placement, and instructional expectations; and recruitment and retention of minority students, faculty, and staff at colleges and universities.

Recruiting and Retaining Minority Teachers: A National Perspective

Dorman, Arthur; and Others—North Central Regional Educational Laboratory Policy Briefs; n8 1990";

This Policy Brief consists of a report on the status of minority teachers in the United States, with emphasis on the states served by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. The first article examines the causes of the decline of minority group teachers and the impact of this shortage on minority students. It lists some of the strategies that have been implemented or proposed to address the problem (early identification of students interested in teaching, magnet school programs, improved guidance in high schools, efforts to present teachers and teaching in a positive light, scholarships and loan forgiveness programs, support structures for minority college students, employment guarantees, support for collaboration between historically Black colleges and research universities, preservice programs that will give students preparation and experience in urban schools, and networking). Regional action and agendas are outlined for the states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. A commentary is presented on new strategies which are being developed for producing more minority teachers. A second commentary describes a plan for the recruitment and retention of minority teachers in Milwaukee. References and resources are included.

Educating Teachers for Family Involvement with Young Native Americans

Sears, Nedra C.; Medearis, Linda Lee Chapman

An Oklahoma program trained preschool teachers to interact with families of Seminole and Chickasaw children enrolled in Head Start. The program focused on integrating American Indian culture and mathematics. Head Start staff were trained in developmentally appropriate mathematics instruction, with an emphasis on employing culturally relevant materials and activities. Research for materials development was conducted at museums, with tribal members, and through examination of tribal documents and exhibits. Families were encouraged to interpret the meanings and traditions of the cultural elements of the program to their children. To facilitate family involvement, training sessions were conducted at Head Start monthly meetings to familiarize parents with learning packets and curriculum. Screening tests of children entering kindergarten revealed a significant increase in program participant scores when compared to students who had not participated in the program. Families responded well to the program, especially materials dealing with traditional stories, fingerplays, games, music, dance, jewelry, and Native language. Teachers can promote family involvement and strengthen the bond between school and home by providing structured materials and activities that are easy for families to understand and do.

Understanding the Cultural Characteristics of American Indian Families: Effective Partnerships under the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)

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Legislation requires that early intervention services be delivered to young special needs children within the family context. To help rural professionals develop effective partnerships with American Indian families, common family cultural characteristics are outlined: extended family, permissive discipline, respect for children, group orientation, and some ambivalence about schools.

Involving Migrant Families in Their Children's Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Schools.

Nancy Feyl Chavkin—In Children of La Frontera: Binational Efforts To Serve Mexican Migrant and Immigrant Students

Following an overview of information on migrant families and children, this chapter describes strategies that administrators and teachers can use to promote family involvement in migrant students' education. Estimates of the numbers of migrant farmworkers and migrant children vary widely, and the diversity of migrant farmworkers' backgrounds makes it difficult to depict the typical migrant family. Nevertheless, most migrant families live lives characterized by low annual income, unhealthy working conditions, deficient living conditions, and the stresses and uncertainties of constant mobility. Migrant children are at high risk of dropping out of school due to poverty, mobility, health problems, and language differences. Family involvement in children's education is clearly beneficial, but educators must be prepared to meet initial reluctance or resistance on the part of migrant parents and to extend the notion of family involvement to include all in the community who affect students' lives. At the school district level, policies that support family and community involvement are essential. District support must occur during three critical stages: policy development, implementation as practical actions, and continuing policy maintenance. Important points to include in district policies are listed, as well as recommendations for implementation and maintenance. Partnership can lead to empowerment of parents, students, educators, and community members. Helpful strategies for teachers include open, continuous, two-way communication between schools and their partners; and training for teachers, parents, and community.

Forging Partnerships between Mexican American Parents and the Schools

Nancy Feyl Chavkin and Dora Lara Gonzalez—ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.

This digest examines barriers to parent participation in the education of Mexican American students, and successful programs and strategies for overcoming those barriers. Research has found family participation in education to be twice as predictive of academic achievement as family socioeconomic status. Mexican American parents care about their children's education but may not be involved in it because they believe the roles of home and school are sharply delineated and they respect the teacher's role. Other barriers to parent participation include a negative view of the school system, past negative experiences with education, and language barriers. Schools can open the doors to more parental involvement through culturally sensitive outreach efforts such as bilingual communication between school and home, home visits, informal parent-organized meetings at a neutral community site, and, in general, a personal approach. Examples of successful family programs and activities include an intergenerational literacy program, informal education on family functioning and child development, after-school and summer classes, parenting training, advocacy training, mother-daughter career programs, and empowerment programs. Partnerships between families and schools involve continuous two-way communication and shared responsibility for educational outcomes. The attitudes and practices of teachers and principals made a difference in the amount of parental involvement and in the achievement of students. Training can help faculty and family members take on the new roles needed for effective partnerships.

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